

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
May 24, 2007

**PILLAR POINT BLUFF COASTAL TRAIL PROJECT**

File No. 04-026-02  
Project Manager: Janet Diehl

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorize disbursement to the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) of up to \$377,000 to construct a mile of Coastal Trail and other trail segments, a new parking lot, and erosion control measures at Pillar Point Bluff.

**LOCATION:** Pillar Point Bluff, just north of Half Moon Bay, San Mateo County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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**EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: [Regional project location map](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Site map and aerial photograph](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [CEQA Mitigated Negative Declaration](#)
  - Exhibit 4: [Site photographs](#)
  - Exhibit 5: [Trail plan](#)
  - Exhibit 6: [Letters of Support](#)
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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred seventy-seven thousand dollars (\$377,000) to the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) for construction and management of the Coastal Trail and other access and erosion control improvements at the Pillar Point Bluff property in San Mateo County, as shown in Exhibits 1 and 2 to the accompanying staff recommendation. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for construction, POST shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:

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- a. Evidence that POST has obtained all necessary permits and approvals, and all other funds necessary to complete the project.
  - b. A final work program, schedule, and names of any contractors or subcontractors to be employed to carry out these tasks.
  - c. A signing plan for the project acknowledging Conservancy participation, and the site's function as a segment of the California Coastal Trail.
2. The project shall be consistent with the Conservancy's "Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development."
  3. In carrying out the project, POST shall comply with all applicable mitigation and monitoring measures of the project that are included in the Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND), adopted under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) on January 10, 2007 by the County of San Mateo, and attached as Exhibit 3 to the accompanying staff recommendation, and the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan accompanying the MND, and with all mitigation, monitoring and other measures that are required by any permit or approval for this project.
  4. POST shall enter into and record in San Mateo County an agreement to protect the public interest in the improvements constructed with the Conservancy's funds, in accordance with Public Resources Code Section 31116(c)."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Sections 31400 *et. seq.* of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding coastal access.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The Peninsula Open Space Trust is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
4. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Mitigated Negative Declaration and Mitigation and Monitoring Program adopted by the County of San Mateo on January 10, 2007 under CEQA and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 3, and finds that there is no substantial evidence that the project as mitigated will have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382.

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5. The proposed project serves greater than local needs."

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### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The proposed project is the construction of close to a mile of Coastal Trail and other connecting trails, a new small parking lot with restroom, and erosion control measures at Pillar Point Bluff, a property known for the views it provides of the unique reefs below and the famous Maverick's wave break offshore (Exhibits 2 and 4). The Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) will carry out the project on the 119-acre property that it acquired in 2004 with partial support from the Conservancy.

Funds to design this Coastal Trail project were included in the Conservancy's 2004 acquisition grant to POST, so that the development of these facilities would not have to wait until a public agency could acquire the property from POST. Since then, POST staff has worked diligently to complete the designs and the environmental review, and receive a Coastal Development Permit. Pending funding and approval of final permits, POST is ready to start construction in August and complete it by the end of October.

In recognition of the long-term informal public use that has occurred on the site, POST intends to generally maintain public trail access in its current form, on the existing system of former agricultural roads and informal single track trails (Exhibit 5). Erosion problems will be corrected by installing drainage features, and in some cases, re-aligning the trails. Other minor improvements will be made to meet fire and emergency access standards. The only major change will be the closing of the informal trails that currently connect the blufftop to the beach through an area of active landslide. These trails will be closed and seeded with native plants, in order to slow erosion, minimize risk to hikers, and to avoid human impacts on the harbor seal colony that frequents the reef below.

The existing trailhead in the County road right-of-way at Alvarado Avenue and Bernal Street will be formalized as the public access point from the blufftop. The trail extending from this point (Trail A on Exhibit 5) will be improved to allow emergency and maintenance vehicle access to the central portion of the property via an eight-foot-wide base rock-surfaced trail. This trail will be built at a wheelchair-accessible grade. The existing road-width trails on the upper, western portion of the site would be maintained for emergency and maintenance vehicle access by installing minor drainage improvements, placing drain rock or base rock in areas of wet or soft soil, closing and restoring duplicate sections of road/trail, and realigning trail sections that are in inappropriate locations due to erosion.

New parking will be provided on the lower part of the property, visible from Highway 1 on the far side of the Half Moon Bay Airport landing strip. The small (10-car) lot will be sited next to an existing industrial/commercial building to minimize visual and habitat impact on the site. Placing the lot in this area also minimizes the traffic impact on the residential community adjacent to the blufftop portion of the property. A small, prefabricated-concrete building housing a pit toilet will be installed on the surface of the parking lot. (Exhibit 5, page 2). The

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new lot will serve people who want to hike along a boardwalk through the seasonal wetlands portion of the property, up to the blufftop.

Two trails will be built here – one at a wheelchair-accessible grade and one with a more direct connection to the blufftop (Trails B and C on Exhibit 5, page 1, upper right-hand corner). Between the parking area and the junction of these trails, the route crosses a seasonal drainage that is a jurisdictional wetland. A simple boardwalk about a foot above grade and about 60 feet long will be installed to minimize impact on the drainage.

Measures to avoid construction-related impacts to animals, including the endangered California red-legged frog and the San Francisco garter snake, are incorporated into the project. These include scheduling construction during the dry season (August – October), the minimal site disturbance required to construct the boardwalk, and snake exclusion fencing around the staging area perimeter. The boardwalk will decrease the impact of people walking through the wetland and potentially injuring snakes and frogs, because the animals can shelter or cross safely under the boardwalk.

POST will continue to manage the Pillar Point Bluff property for public use until it can be transferred to an appropriate entity for long-term stewardship. Given current budget constraints of public agencies, POST expects to own the property for the next few years. The County of San Mateo, which manages the parks at the nearby James V. Fitzgerald Marine Reserve and Pillar Point Marsh, has been seeking funds, with the hope of eventually acquiring the property from POST. A portion of the proposed Conservancy grant – \$70,000 – will be available to POST for operation and management of the trails and parking lot until the property can be conveyed into public ownership.

**Site Description:** The Pillar Point Bluff property is located in the coastal zone just north of Pillar Point, a small peninsula that extends into the ocean north of Half Moon Bay. The 119-acre property is rectangular in shape, bounded by Half Moon Bay Airport to the east, residential lots in Seal Cove to the north, a trailer park, industrial/commercial buildings and privately owned vacant agricultural lot to the south, and about 2,500 feet of shoreline to the west. The intertidal zone and offshore area immediately adjacent to the property are part of San Mateo County's Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, designated as a Marine Life Refuge and an Area of Special Biological Significance by the State of California. The property's blufftops provide excellent views of coastal tidepools and beaches to the west, and of the protected mountain ridges and picturesque agricultural lands of the Rancho Corral de Tierra property to the east.

The main topographic feature of the property is a prominent ridge that runs across the entire property parallel to the coastline at a maximum elevation of 170 feet. The west side of the ridge is a cliff that drops down steeply to the ocean. Eastward, the property flattens along Airport Street. The striking topographic difference between the ridge and the flatlands is the result of the Seal Cove fault trace, part of the active San Gregorio Fault Zone. The 900-foot-wide ridge is also characterized by an unusual series of parallel lesser ridges and troughs, some of which contain water seasonally.

The blufftop part of the property contains a willow riparian area, coastal scrub, and a perennial spring-fed pond within a swale. A large meadow at the southwest blufftop corner of the property

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had been dominated by non-native invasive Pampas grass until it was removed by POST in 2005. POST is in its third year of an ambitious project to eradicate Pampas grass from the entire property.

A wetland area on the flat, low-lying eastern part of the property near Airport Street has been documented to contain several wetland indicator plants, including species of the Cyperaceae (sedge) and Juncaceae (rush) families, with heavy stands of Pacific silverweed (*Potentilla anserina pacifica*), California blackberry (*Rubus ursinus*), common willow herb (*Epilobium ciliatum*) and willow dock (*Rumex salicifolius*). The property may provide habitat for the endangered San Francisco garter snake and California red-legged frog, as well as for the special status salt marsh common yellowthroat, loggerhead shrike, and San Francisco dusky-footed woodrat.

There are no buildings on the Pillar Point Bluff property, but there are remnants of former agricultural operations on the low-lying portion of the property, including the foundation of a dairy barn, a former reservoir, old dirt roads, and fallow farmland. The most prominent man-made impact on the property is the extensive network of old farm roads and informal trails along the bluff top.

**Project History:** In order to protect the property from private development, POST acquired the Pillar Point Bluff property in 2004 for \$2.7 million, well below the \$3.8 million appraised value. The Conservancy granted a million dollars toward the purchase price, and the rest came from POST's fundraising efforts. Because the Conservancy identified the design and construction of a trail on the landward portion of the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve as a priority action in its 2002 report, *Completing the California Coastal Trail* (page 47, #4), an additional \$85,000 for trail planning was included in the Conservancy's acquisition grant to POST. Over the past two years, POST has worked with consultants to develop a trail project and erosion control plan, and to obtain the necessary permits. Pending funding and approval of final permits, POST is ready to start construction in August and complete it by the end of October.

### **PROJECT FINANCING:**

The Conservancy would be the sole source of funds for the trail construction phase of this project. POST's contribution of \$1,700,000 to the acquisition phase of the project, and its expenses for restoration, operations and maintenance to date, represent a significant matching contribution.

#### **Trail Construction Phase (current action):**

Coastal Conservancy*	<u>\$377,000</u>
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#### **Total Project Costs**

Coastal Conservancy – acquisition	\$1,000,000
Coastal Conservancy – trail planning	85,000
Coastal Conservancy – trail construction	377,000

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Peninsula Open Space Trust – acquisition	<u>1,700,000</u>
<b>Total Project Costs:</b>	<b>\$ 3,162,000</b>

\*The expected source of Conservancy funds for the construction portion of this project is the FY 2004/05 appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhoods and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 40). This funding source may be used for the development of land and water resources in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Public Resources Code Section 5096.650(b)). The proposed project serves to assist in the development of land-based public access to and along the coast. The expected source of Conservancy funds for the portion of the grant that would support operation and maintenance of the access improvements is the Coastal Access Account.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400-31409) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the implementation of public coastal accessways.

Under Chapter 9, the Conservancy is authorized in Section 31400 to have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to a nonprofit organization to acquire land, and develop and manage it for public access purposes to and along the coast. Section 31400.2 authorizes the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of the acquisition of interests in lands and the initial development of public accessways to and along the state's coastline by a nonprofit organization. Section 31400.3 allows the Conservancy to provide assistance as is required to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of coastal accessways. Section 31408(a) provides for the Conservancy to coordinate the development of a California Coastal Trail. The proposed project is consistent with all of these sections, in that the proposed Conservancy grant will enable POST, a nonprofit organization, to construct almost a mile of the Coastal Trail, connecting trails, and related public use facilities, and would facilitate the development of the property for public access and recreation in the shortest possible timeframe.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ACCESS PROGRAM STANDARDS:**

Consistent with Standard No. 1, the Pillar Point Bluff Coastal Trail has been designed to minimize alteration of natural landforms and to be subordinate to the setting's character. The trail project has been designed in a way that prevents hazards to the land and to public safety (Standard Nos. 1 and 2), ensures the privacy of private landowners (Standard Nos. 1 and 4), and protects environmentally sensitive habitats (Standard Nos. 1 and 5). Consistent with Standard No. 8, the proposed project will establish a trail on an ocean-front parcel that will connect with other parks on the shore, in particular the County of San Mateo's Fitzgerald Marine Reserve. Also consistent with Standard No. 8, the project will eliminate existing trails on geologically unstable and erosive soils. Consistent with Standard No. 12, the proposed parking lot will include other support facilities, such as directional and resource interpretation signs. Consistent with Standard No. 13, the parking lot and one of the trails to and along the blufftop will be wheelchair-accessible.

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### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 1 Objectives B and C** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the project includes the construction of almost a mile of the Coastal Trail on the Pillar Point Bluff property, as well as the placement of Coastal Trail signs on the new trail.

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objectives A and D**, the project will improve a coastal park property, increase coastal recreation opportunities for residents and visitors, and correct dangerous conditions by constructing new trails, a parking lot and related facilities, and restoring degraded blufftop areas.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

#### **Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The proposed project is supported by State Senator Leland Yee, Assemblyman Gene Mullin, the National Park Service, the San Mateo County Parks Department, and others. Letters of support written to the Conservancy in 2004 urged both the acquisition of the property and the development of the Coastal Trail and erosion control project recommended in this report; they are attached as Exhibit 6, along with a recent letter.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the County of San Mateo.
5. **Need:** The Pillar Point Bluff property is already heavily used, evidenced by a network of informal trails that contributes to soil erosion and damage to sensitive habitat. There are no local funds, however, to support the construction of the proposed project, which will reduce erosion and build appropriate public trails and related facilities.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Pillar Point Bluff is a scenic and recreational resource of regional and statewide importance (see "Site Description" section, above). Completion of the Coastal Trail is a major goal of a number of state agencies, including the Department of Parks and Recreation and the California Coastal Commission. The Conservancy identified the design and construction of a trail on the landward portion of the Fitzgerald Marine reserve as a priority action in its 2002 report, *Completing the California Coastal Trail* (page 47, #4), a goal which will be partially fulfilled with this grant.

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### **Additional Criteria**

7. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project would develop the Coastal Trail while protecting coastal resources.
8. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
9. **Readiness:** Environmental review under CEQA has been completed, and all required permits to construct the project are expected to be issued by the end of June. If Conservancy funds are authorized and the final permits issued, POST will be ready to initiate the project by the summer of 2007.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The proposed project would further many policies of the County of San Mateo’s Local Coastal Plan. Some of the most directly relevant are listed below:

#### **Sensitive Habitats Component**

- 7.31 Restrict pedestrian traffic in bluff and cliff areas and on faces to a limited number of well-defined trails which avoid seabird nesting and roosting sites.

#### **Shoreline Access Component**

- 10.9 Provide safe access to shoreline destinations; discourage public use of hazardous trails; protect sensitive habitat.
- 10.12 Locate shoreline access within existing or new residential areas in the least disruptive manner. In all areas where topography permits, provide shoreline access for the disabled without altering major landforms.

#### **Recreation/Visitor-Serving Facilities Component**

- 11.13 Establish a trails program for the Coastal Zone with the objective of connecting major shoreline to inland park and recreation facilities and trails, and linking existing and proposed recreation facilities along the coast.

The proposed project will protect sensitive habitat by providing and directing public access along a Coastal Trail so that environmentally sensitive areas are avoided, scenic views are protected, blufftop erosion decreased, and the public has access to the shoreline for recreation.

### **COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The County of San Mateo (County) is the lead agency for purposes of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for this project. The County prepared a Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND) and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan (MMRP) for the project. On October 26, 2006, the County posted a Notice of Intent to Adopt the MND at the County



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Planning Department, and published notices in local newspapers. On January 10, 2007, the County approved the project, adopted the MND and MMRP and determined that, consistent with 14 California Code of Regulations Section 753.5(d), there was no substantial evidence before it that the project, if subject to the mitigation measures contained in the Mitigated Negative Declaration, will have a significant effect on the environment. On February 13, 2007, the County filed a Notice of Determination with the County Clerk of San Mateo County.

CEQA requires consideration of potential environmental effects of agency actions and approvals, unless exempt. With respect to the work that the Coastal Conservancy would fund, the MND identified potentially significant effects in the following areas: Land Suitability and Geology; Vegetation and Wildlife; Physical Resources; Air Quality, Water Quality and Noise, and Aesthetic, Cultural and Historic Resources. Mitigation measures have been adopted to reduce these potential effects to a level of insignificance, as summarized below (See also Exhibit 3 for a more detailed discussion of the mitigation measures).

### **Land Suitability and Geology**

The project will involve construction on slopes of 15% or greater, in areas of soil instability, landslide or severe erosion. One of the trails will cross a small ephemeral stream.

Mitigation measures to address these impacts include the requirement that, prior to the issuance of a building permit, the applicant (POST) shall submit to the County Planning Department for review and approval an erosion and drainage control plan which demonstrates how the parking area, restroom site, and connecting trails will be graded and drainage will be controlled to avoid erosion and siltation. The plan shall adhere to the San Mateo Countywide Stormwater Pollution Prevention Program's "General Construction and Site Supervision Guidelines." Potential effects on the stream crossing will be mitigated by incorporating culverts and a boardwalk in the trail.

### **Vegetation and Wildlife**

The wetlands within the project area provide known or potential habitat for the state-listed rare California red-legged frog, and the site also provides potential habitat for northern harriers, loggerhead shrike, saltmarsh common yellowthroat, yellow warblers, and San Francisco dusky-footed woodrat. The federally-listed rare and endangered San Francisco garter snake may occasionally forage in the marshy areas of the property. Harbor seals use the reefs adjacent to the ocean bluff for haul-out areas.

To minimize the potential for direct impacts to these species, POST shall ensure that a qualified biologist prepares worker education materials regarding the red-legged frog and the garter snake. The biologist shall conduct pre-construction surveys for red-legged frogs and garter snakes, and if frogs or snakes are found, shall halt all work in the area until contact with the California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The biologist also shall monitor all vegetation removal and grading within 500 feet of wetlands. The boundary of wetlands, if they occur within 50 feet of any trail or other construction, shall be demarcated in the field such that trail work/improvements occur outside these areas.

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Additional mitigation measures regarding the parking lot area include erection of exclusion fencing before construction, restrictions on erosion control matting, utilization of Best Management Practices, and, once construction is completed, keeping the parking lot closed at night in order to reduce kill of amphibians and reptiles. The parking lot shall not have night lighting. In constructing the blufftop trailhead, POST shall demarcate the patches of native *Juncus* and ensure that work occurs outside of these areas.

Finally, all construction work within 500 feet of any wetland area shall be scheduled for the driest time of year, typically August 1 to October 15. Construction of any kind on the project shall be scheduled to occur only between August 1 and March 1, in order to avoid the nesting season for special status birds and the primary pupping season for harbor seals.

### **Physical Resources**

Construction of the parking area and trails will involve about 812 cubic yards of cut and 540 cubic yards of fill. Implementation of the erosion control plan will reduce this impact to a less-than-significant level.

### **Air Quality, Water Quality, Sonic**

The project could generate significant amounts of dust as a result of grading of the parking lot and vehicle travel. To reduce this potential, POST shall implement dust control measures laid out in Mitigation Measure 13, including watering the construction and grading areas at least twice daily and covering all trucks hauling soil.

The grading activities will temporarily make more noise than is typical for the site. There are residences nearby, and the residents could be affected. To mitigate this potential impact, POST shall limit construction activities to the hours from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday, and 9 to 5 on Saturday, with no construction to occur on Sundays or national holidays. Noise levels produced by proposed construction activities shall not exceed the 80-dBA level at any one moment.

### **Aesthetic, Cultural, Historic Resources**

Because the entire project site should be considered sensitive for prehistoric archaeological and historic cultural resources, several mitigation measures will be implemented to reduce potential impacts to a less-than-significant level. Initial grading for all phases of this project will be monitored by a qualified archaeologist. Archaeological monitoring will be conducted under a written Archaeological Monitoring Agreement and must be submitted to the San Mateo County Planning Department for review and approval. The Agreement will provide for, at a minimum, the provisions identified in the MMRP. The project archaeologist will conduct an intensive survey of any trail improvements in certain areas laid out in Mitigation Measure 16. If the trail alignment crosses any portion of identified sites, the archaeologist shall develop an avoidance/minimization plan for review and approval by the County prior to any construction. The applicant and construction contractors will be prepared to respond appropriately if previously undetected archaeological resources are encountered anywhere in the project area, and will be prepared to carry out the requirements of California state law with respect to the

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discovery of human remains during construction, whether historic or prehistoric.

**Conclusion**

After reviewing the MND and MMRP, staff concurs that the project, as mitigated, will not have a significant effect on the environment, and recommends that the Conservancy make such a finding. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Determination.